

Contagious Stories

Acts 26:1-30

Turn to Acts 26:1-30 and follow along while I read.

Do you like stories? I do. One of my favorite short stories came from American Literature in High School. Written by James Thurber, you may have also read *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*.

Real life stories can be even more powerful leaving a deep and lasting impression. They can change minds, touch hearts, and impact lives, especially if they are about people we know. Real life stories can even reshape societies and redirect history.

Take for example, someone we have never met but have heard about. This story is about a man who was a hard living, liquor slugging, vulgarity spewing captain of a slave ship in the 1700's. You may immediately know that we're talking about John Newton. In the midst of a terrible storm he cried out to God for deliverance from the wind and waves, and mercifully he received it.

That experience was used by God to dramatically reorient his entire life and perspective, including his view on slavery. His story and experiences became key influences in the life of William Wilberforce who, decades later, succeeded in abolishing the slave trade in the entire British Empire.

Or consider the celebrated story of someone you may have studied in recent history. She was a small but powerful woman who in December of 1955 defied the establishment by refusing to move to the back of the bus as African-Americans were expected to do in Montgomery, Alabama. The story of Rosa Parks is one of defiance and bravery, a story that was told countless times and eventually helped fuel the entire civil rights movement. Her actions brought sweeping changes to our nation's laws and attitudes toward minorities.

Another story that came out of the 1950s is one that continues to provide change and relief. You may not know the name Bob Pierce, but you certainly have heard of his organization. As a young missionary he felt compassion for a young Chinese girl whose widowed mother could not afford to send her to a mission school. He gave her all he had to help. It was only \$15. That was enough to enroll her in the school, and he committed to send money every month for her continued support. When he later came back to America and began to tell others about the needs he had seen in Asia and the story of what he had done to help this girl, the concept of child sponsorship caught on and began to grow. Today the organization he started has over 500,000 people sponsoring children every month, supporting millions of people in nearly 100 countries. It has become one of the largest relief agencies on the planet. The agency is World Vision.

Do you see why stories can be so powerful? These three alone helped to stop slavery in the Western world, curb the injustice of racism and prejudice in the United States, and provide food and support to needy people around the world. **Are those concerns totally eradicated?** No, but the point is that they have created awareness about needs to the point of action and other stories continue to inspire and change others.

When it comes to the theme of our series "Developing a Contagious Faith" by being a contagious Christian, stories can have a huge impact as well. That's why the Bible is so adamant in **I Peter 3:15** about our need to **"always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."**

If we are a genuine follower of Jesus, we have an important story to tell. We sing about it.

We've a story to tell to the nations
That shall turn their hearts to the right,
A story of truth and mercy,

A story of peace and light,
A story of peace and light.

For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noonday bright,
And Christ's great kingdom shall come to earth –
The kingdom of love and light.

Our story may not be as dramatic as those I just shared, but all of us even with an ordinary vanilla flavored story about the change our faith made in us can have a dramatic effect on those we talk to. Our testimonies can be contagious in their influence and impact.

Chuck Swindoll in his book *Come Before Winter* wrote “The skeptic may deny your doctrine or attack your church, but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that your life has been changed.”

What is he saying? Real change from a personal experience due to a new relationship with Christ cannot be ignored. It cannot be refuted.

Acts 26 is a great example of how God used one man's story. In this passage Paul is in prison for his faith, and he's given the opportunity to speak in his own defense before King Agrippa. He tells his story in a clear and powerful way. His story is something we can all learn from in helping us put together and share our story.

It is quite an exciting story – even if you have heard it for the umpteenth time. The way he went about telling his story provides some clues for each of us to benefit from as we share our story with others. For the rest of our time together we want to look at five principles from Paul's example to help us be ready to give an answer when the time comes.

The five principles are set in an acrostic using the word STORY.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER ONE

S – START WITH THE OTHER PERSON

It can be tempting to take the attitude that this is my story so it's all about me. If that is the approach we take, we may have noticed that the person lost interest from the start.

Take a look back at **verses 2-3** and notice that is not what Paul did. He began by addressing his audience – **“King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently.”**

In his opening remarks Paul focused his attention directly on his listener, King Agrippa. More than just being polite or introducing the topic he wanted to talk about, he was very careful to establish areas of common ground that they had with each other on an ordinary, human level. Notice those commonalities from the text.

They were both Jewish, even if King Agrippa was not a practicing Jew.

They were both well-educated and both were aware of the details and nuances of the Jewish faith. Paul spoke to him with great respect, even if he didn't respect his values or lifestyle. He didn't preach at him or deride his lifestyle.

Paul was establishing rapport, which earned him the right to ask at the end of **verse 3** that the king patiently listen to what he had to say. He was asking the king to hear him out.

Respecting the other person will go a long way in sharing our story.

Some of you have in the past been through the Evangelism Explosion program. One of the first things they teach you is to look for common ground. If you go into a home notice pictures on the wall or

their décor. Something of interest may catch your eye that is of common interest between you.

If you are just getting to know the person, ask if the pictures are of children or grandchildren and where they live and how often they get together.

It might be that your children or grandchildren are the same age.

It might be that your common ground is that like your family, theirs may live away as well.

They may have a lot of antiques and you might like antiques as well. Ask the history.

Maybe they have a piano or other instrument. That might be a common ground.

Maybe they enjoy word working. You might like a tour sometime of their workshop.

You might find out in conversation that they have had a similar experience with health concerns.

Paul and Agrippa couldn't have been more different.

Paul was a prisoner. Agrippa was a king.

Paul was poor. Agrippa was rich.

Paul was brought in chains led by guards perhaps to the snickering of others in the chamber.

Agrippa was brought in with great pomp and applause.

To get them on the same playing field so to speak, Paul began with the common ground between the two of them and he spoke with respect.

This is the example of what Paul taught in his first letter to Corinth.

“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” I Corinthians 9:22-23

In other words, he was very intentional about relating his message in a way that would be

understandable and relevant to the person he was talking to – without ever softening or compromising the message in any way. Paul's life was the gospel and he set aside whatever necessary in reaching people with it. He voluntarily restrained himself of freedoms in order to reach unbelievers.

How about you? If we are honest with ourselves and with others, we would have to admit that most of us as Christians struggle with either not talking about our faith at all, or going to the other extreme and talking only about OUR faith and experience. Let's not fall into the latter trap of self-centered spirituality. Put the person first. Ask questions and really listen. Get to know them and understand where they're coming from. Then, based on what you learn, relate your story to their experience and situation. You'll be much more effective and much more useful in God's hands. Something in your story just might resonate with their own heart because they can identify with something you share.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO

T – TALK WITH CONFIDENCE AND CLARITY

Let's keep in mind what is happening here in our passage. Paul is a prisoner and he is actually brought into the room wearing heavy chains. It was a humiliating situation standing in shackles before the king and his sister. **Acts 25** says they came into the room with great pomp. It was a grand procession, one of splendor and magnificence befitting their position. It was a showy display.

The word **“pomp”** as used in **Acts 25:23** is the Greek word *phantasia*, from which we get our word fantasy. A great musical composition escorted them into the grand room. As they walked down the long aisle, it might have been on a regally colored carpet runner or a beautiful floor. Glancing to the right and left they would give a little nod to other dignitaries acknowledging their presence or a

gesture thanking them for their applause. At last they would come to ornately decorated and carved seats where they would take their place. If it were to happen today, you can almost hear the cameras clicking pictures and reporters giving live news coverage about the event to a watching audience. Journalists from *People* magazine would be writing about the fashions they wore and the number of attendants that were part of their court.

Moments later, the accused was brought in. There was no applause. There was no music. There may have been snickers or sneers or words of disdain. He did not carry a scepter or wear a royal robe and crown. His only ornament was a chain that manacled his two wrists together, they may have also been around his ankles as well. The entrance of Paul was so much different than what had preceded moments earlier. Paul had a huge psychological disadvantage in this interchange.

Yet it is obvious that he is not intimidated or hesitant in his address. After all, at his conversion it was told to Ananias in **Acts 9** that **“this man is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”** This was his calling. **Why should he shrink away from this opportunity?**

When he was given the opportunity, he waived his hand to silence the crowd, which implies to me that there must have been a lot of side conversations and murmuring going on. Then he boldly began to speak. He talked about being **“fortunate”** to be speaking to the king. He laid out his facts clearly and concisely. He confidently appealed to the knowledge of his Jewish listeners at one point, and to that of the king himself at another. He stood up to Festus when Festus called him insane, and calmly asserted that he was not crazy, that in fact everything he said was completely **“true and reasonable.”**

Where did Paul get such confidence when everything seemed to be against Him? Let me suggest a couple of reasons.

First, he knew who God was.

Paul had long since learned about and experienced the truth about God and the Messiah, Jesus. He had carefully looked into all of the claims and the evidence about Him, talked personally to some of the people Jesus had walked with and came to the conclusion that it was all true. You have confidence in the truth.

I read recently about a consultant who was hired to shake things up at businesses. He would march out onto the floor or office and pick someone randomly and tell the person they were fired. The person would hang their head and walk out, believing that they had been caught in whatever they were guilty of. Seven out of ten believed they had done something that warranted their dismissal. The other three armed with the truth of their innocence could stand confidently in that truth.

Paul knew who God was and was confident. He had a personal encounter with Him and as a result had made a dramatic life altering change in his mission. Besides, he would write to the Romans that he was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ because it is the power of God for salvation. He would also write to his young protégé Timothy and tell him **“I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted him for that day.” (II Timothy 1:12)**

Paul had great confidence because he knew God.

How is it that a cardiologist has confidence during open heart surgery? He knows the heart.

How is it that an electrician has confidence working with electricity? He knows electricity.

How is it that a mechanic has confidence working on an engine? He knows the engine.

How is it that Paul had confidence in God? He knew who God was because He spent time with God. Maybe we lack confidence in telling our story because we haven't spent as much time with God as we should.

Second, he knew who he was.

Paul knew he was a favored son of the King of kings (as we all are). He wasn't going to let a mere human king intimidate Him. He had already been in the presence of the King of kings. Paul knew his position in Christ. He knew he was part of God's forever family.

Knowing the truth about God and about Himself gave Paul courage and strength even in the most difficult circumstances. That can be true of us as well. Maybe we feel intimidated to share our story because we haven't spent time with God like we know we should or we don't really know our position in the family of God. Instead of being confident about the story God gave us we're like his description to the Ephesians **“tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching.” (Ephesians 4:14)**

To gain more confidence take advantage of the opportunities we offer as a church or recommend in the church community that can help you grow in your faith and gain more confidence.

Attend the men's or women's studies.

Come to Wednesday Prayer meeting – yes we're going through Philippians slowly, but it's a growing time for all of us.

Participate in the contagious Christian study. We'll offer it again or after you're through it, borrow the DVD's to brush up.

Start a small group Bible study in your home.

Go to BSF. They have great studies and some extra courses on sharing your faith.

Our desire is to help you get grounded in the truth, to be clear in your knowledge of God and confident in your standing as the children of God, knowing

that it will make each of us stronger in our daily lives and bolder in our decisive witness for Him.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER THREE

O – ORGANIZE YOUR STORY CHRONOLOGICALLY

As we read through the account in Acts you may have noticed that Paul didn't ramble around in a random fashion or give unnecessary details when he told his story to Agrippa. He had obviously thought it through ahead of time and had organized his thoughts. He was **“prepared to give and answer.”**

I think that Paul honed his testimony on the Roman guards that were chained to him night and day. I can just hear Paul say something like “Hey, I have to give a defense to the king and eventually to Caesar, let me share it with you and you can give me some feedback.” When he got to the King it was sharpened and concise. His testimony only took about 3-4 minutes.

He related his experience in the order that it actually happened.

He begins in **verses 4-11** talking about his life before he met Christ. In effect he was saying this is who I was. We all have a time in our life before Christ. We may have been saved at 3 or 13 or 30. None of us is born a Christian.

Beginning in **verse 12** he shifts his focus and tells about the encounter he had with Jesus on the road to Damascus and he elaborates on that experience in **verse 18**. If you know Jesus personally you all have an encounter with Him. It may not be as dramatic as Paul's. Not many have a Damascus road experience but we do have an encounter when we realized that our life was headed down the wrong road and we were trying to reach heaven on our own when we realized that was not good enough. It is only through Christ. We recognized that we are all guilty of wrong doing but can experience forgiveness through Christ.

I was greatly troubled by a comment made on TV a week ago when there was talk about the two Boston bombers deserving hell for their actions and they were happy about it. The fact of the matter is that we all deserve hell. Only when we recognize that God loved us so much that His Son died in our place so we could live forever with Him by faith in His Son.

Then beginning in **verse 19**, Paul talks about his life after his encounter with Christ. He shares what happened after he met Christ. **“So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven...”**

Sometimes we want to go right into sharing our faith with our gospel guns blazing away quoting all the verses we know about salvation and judgment and the person turns and high-tails it out of Dodge.

As you read through Paul’s testimony, you can’t help but see how natural it was. Here’s my life before. Here’s what happened that caused a change. Here’s what’s happened since then. Look at the difference, you can’t refute it.

That’s what marketing does. At the gym where I go to work out there is a big bank of TVs and some of the stations have those infomercials advertising fitness programs or products. Here’s Sam before starting the program. Here’s Sam after. He lost 57 pounds and 7 inches.

My favorite is the hair club infomercial. Here’s Pastor Howie before. Here’s Pastor Howie after.

Our story of faith in Christ is about a before and after picture. To be effective, have it organized. The difference is a deep, real, and lasting change that hits people on an emotional level. Maybe the person you are talking about knew you before and now sees the difference. Your story can evoke a real heartfelt response in the listener. The change in Paul couldn’t be denied.

Your story might be like vanilla ice cream. You may feel it’s just plain, but it’s your story. This is who I was, this is who I am now.

Your story may be like Butter Pecan ice cream, you know, I was really nuts before I let Christ change me.

Maybe your story is like Superman ice cream. It was really flavorful and wild.

The point is we all have a story. Put it together and share it. That story can have such a huge impact on the people around you even if it might seem bland and unexciting to you. If knowing Jesus has changed your life, then there are people out there who can benefit from hearing your story.

That’s why I am so excited many of you are taking the Contagious Christian series. It will help you shape your story of faith in Christ to share with other people around you. It will be exciting to hear stories of how God is using your story in the lives of others.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER FOUR

R – RELATE YOUR EXPERIENCE TO THE OTHER PERSON’S LIFE

The importance of this point can’t be overemphasized.

One of the greatest mistakes a leader can make is to talk about what is needed in an organization, but then fail to ask people to make the changes necessary to actually make that need happen.

One of the most common errors that salespeople commit is to present all of the details about their product, but then not ask the potential customer for the order – to close the deal.

If all we do is tell the story of our personal encounter with Christ and leave it there, we will be ineffective. We’ll be an “almost” Contagious Christian. We’ll have told them some interesting spiritual autobiographical information, but we will likely not persuade them to follow Christ.

Look at **verses 24-27**.

Festus thought Paul's much learning had made him insane to talk about something about a resurrection. But Paul, addressing Festus, brought King Agrippa into the conversation by referring to the knowledge the king had about what he was talking about. Nothing of what Paul had said about his background or about Jesus had escaped the notice of Agrippa. As the Jew in charge of the Temple, he was bound to confess his faith in the prophets. Paul's interpretation about the prophets though was different from that of the king's. By raising the question to Agrippa, Paul had him cornered. He had to respond in some way either in favor of or against what Paul had just testified about. Paul was asking the king to make a decision about Christ based on both his previous knowledge and Paul's personal experience with Christ. Agrippa couldn't deny the change.

In effect he was saying to the king "you've heard my story, you've got the information, you know it's all true, now you do something about it."

Let's follow the example of Paul, share our experience about Christ with others and encourage them to act on that knowledge by seeking to follow Jesus themselves.

PRINCIPLE NUMBER FIVE

Y – YOUR MISSION: POINT PEOPLE TO CHRIST

The reason Paul was so bold, clear, and persuasive was because he knew he was on a mission. His main concern was not to defend his innocence and preserve his life - it was to save the lives and eternities of the people who were listening to him. Our story in Christ is a message for anyone, anywhere and anytime. It is a mission of hope in Christ.

This wasn't merely an accounting of what happened to him. To Paul this was evangelism. He seized any and every opportunity to proclaim the gospel of how anyone can have a destiny changing experience with Christ. It didn't even matter if they were his enemies. He wanted them to have a personal, life altering experience with the Savior.

Notice in **verse 28** that his hearers got the point.

"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"

Agrippa was feeling the challenge and it made him uncomfortable. It's like the guy in the interviews we saw in the video in week one when random people on the street were asked who Jesus was. His response was **"that is a topic I don't want to discuss."**

When the gospel of Christ is presented people will respond in one of three ways.

1. They will be like Festus and think the whole thing is absurd and that we're crazy. To use his words "insane." The Bible says that the cross to many people is foolishness. They don't get it.
2. They will respond like King Agrippa with either indifference or indecisiveness which really means they ignore it. To use his words **"do you think you can persuade me in such a short time?"**
3. They will respond like Paul and recognize the life change that takes place both now and for eternity and respond by accepting this gift of salvation.

Paul responded to the king's admission in a very gracious manner. He didn't say "Well, I don't want to change anyone's mind. I'm just saying that the Jesus approach works for me, but He may not work for you. You have your own truth. After all, it would be presumptuous of me to try to tell you my

way is right and your way is wrong. I'll just pray that one way or another God will lead you in the right direction, whatever that might be, and let's not try to offend each other – okay?"

Paul may have scanned the room, look the king in the eye and throwing all caution to the wind said, **“Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.” (v. 29 – NLT)**

Paul was trying to persuade everyone in the room listening to him to put everything aside that was keeping them from making a decision to become a forever follower of Christ.

Paul came and left in physical chains. Festus and King Agrippa conferred and agreed that if Paul hadn't appealed to Caesar he could have been free of his physical chains.

The sad part of the story is that King Agrippa was the real prisoner. He was bound in spiritual chains. He allowed his pride to stand between him and spiritual freedom and chose to remain shackled in his sin when through repentance he could have cast them aside. He chose to quickly dismiss the conviction that must have been tugging on his heart to follow Christ. He got up and left the room.

You have a story to tell.
Start with the other person
Talk with confidence and clarity
Organize it naturally
Relate it to the other person
Your mission is to point people to Christ so that they can begin their own story.

Your story powerfully illustrates that God is alive in your life and makes a marked difference in how you think, what you value, and how you live. Living an authentic Christ centered life is our best argument for why others should follow Him too.

John Newton, the slave trader who called out to God from his ship in the middle of the storm became a committed follower of Jesus. He not only spoke and wrote about his story, he put into a song that has become the favorite of millions for hundreds of years.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see!

Who are you like today?
Are you like Festus?
Are you like Agrippa?
Are you like Paul?

Will you willingly commit to Christ today to share your story to people who need to see and want to know that change within their heart is possible, but possible only through knowing Him?